

Assimilation among Multiracial Students at Berjaya University College

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ABSTRACT

Assimilation, in broad terms, refers to the sociological and cultural process by which individuals or groups from diverse backgrounds are integrated into the prevailing or predominant culture of a society by abandoning their own culture. However, in this study, assimilation is defined as the process of embracing the cultural practices of others without losing our own identity. In multicultural societies, assimilation plays a critical role in facilitating social integration. However, students from multiple racial backgrounds may encounter difficulties in assimilating into the wider cultural context due to many reasons. In line with this situation, this study aims to assess assimilation among multiracial students at a private college in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by using a component of social integration which is assimilation. Employing 85 students as research respondents, this study utilised both a questionnaire and a focus group study to collect data. The findings reveal that generally students felt comfortable to interact with other people of different racial backgrounds such as participating in cultural activities of other racial groups at college. Nevertheless in certain situations, students expressed discomfort with wearing costumes that represent racial groups different from their own.

Keywords: Assimilation, culture, identity, racial group, social integration

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, a Southeast Asian nation, is renowned for its heterogeneous people. The Malay community comprises around 21.3 million inhabitants, making it the largest racial group. There is a substantial but smaller population of Chinese, estimated at roughly 6,862.4 million, and Indian communities, with over 2,001.0 million people (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2023). The remaining portion consists of individuals from other races and non-citizens of Malaysia. The heterogeneity of Malaysia is inextricably linked with its history. The colonial history of Malaysia has significantly influenced the current socio-cultural structure of the country. When Malaysia was under British colonial control, different racial groups were subjected to physical, social, and economic segregation. Despite of this matter, Malaysia is still widely regarded as a paradigm of harmony amidst diversity on a global scale, as its varied populace coexist peacefully while enjoying a thriving economy (Abdul Rahman, 2002; Shamsul, 2008)

The interplay between various racial groups within a community is crucial for the advancement of a thriving nation. One aspect of a thriving nation is assimilation. Assimilation is a crucial factor in fostering a peaceful connection among individuals from different racial backgrounds.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2023) provides the following definition for assimilation: “the act of

integrating oneself or others into a country or community, rather than remaining distinct as a separate group.” On the other hand Gordon (1964) defines assimilation as the process by which immigrant populations become absorbed into the host community, resulting in the loss of certain aspects of their own culture as they adopt the culture of the host community (Gordon 1964). It is apparent that the definition of assimilation as it is explained by Gordon is widely accepted. However, the process of assimilation in Malaysian society differs from historical cases in certain nations (Ibrahim 2021). This is mainly because the Malaysian government endeavours to promote assimilation as the ‘acceptance’ of cultural diversity among different races (Ibrahim, 2021).

The Malaysian government’s approach to promote assimilation as acceptance and integration does not seek to erase cultural identities but rather to foster a national identity that encompasses various cultural elements. The government’s policies encourage different racial communities—Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups—to maintain their distinct cultural practices while simultaneously embracing a shared Malaysian identity. Shared Malaysian identity can be seen in national celebrations and public holidays in Malaysia. They are inclusive of the major cultural and religious festivals of all racial groups. Festivals such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, and the indigenous harvest festival, Gawai, are celebrated nationwide, with public holidays and nationwide festivities. This inclusive approach not only acknowledges the cultural significance of these events but also promotes cross-cultural understanding and participation. By celebrating each community’s traditions, the government reinforces the message that all cultures are integral to the national identity.

In educational institutions, assimilation among multiracial students is crucial because it fosters a more inclusive and harmonious learning environment, promotes mutual respect and understanding, and prepares students to thrive in a diverse and interconnected world. However, according to Mun (2020), it appears that all racial communities in Malaysia, with their deeply ingrained strengths and weaknesses, are not fully prepared for the changes that accompany the process of assimilation. The same problem is preliminarily observed at BERJAYA University College, where some students, particularly the Malay, Chinese, and Indian students, find it challenging to engage with and accept cultural practices different from their own. This challenge highlights the need to better understand how students from different backgrounds assimilate and adapt to diverse cultural practices

Despite the importance of assimilation among multiracial students in Malaysia, most local research has predominantly focused on social integration in general, rather than specifically examining assimilation in Malaysia (Taib, 1984; Ramlee et al. 2009; Seman, 2011; Bachora, 2014; Mahzan et al., 2017). To address this research gap, the current study aims to investigate multiracial students’ perception regarding their assimilation at BERJAYA University College by using a questionnaire adapted from Ramlee et al. (2009), which includes assimilation as a key component of social integration.

Research question

What are the perceptions of multiracial students at BERJAYA University College regarding their assimilation at this higher learning institution?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assimilation in Malaysian context

Unlike many other nations, where assimilation often implies the complete adoption of a dominant culture by minority groups, Malaysia’s approach to assimilation has been shaped by its colonial past, the demands of nation-building, and a strong desire to maintain racial harmony (Hirschman, 1986; Shamsul, 1996; Mahathir, 1991). During the colonial period, British policies reinforced racial identities by segregating

communities and assigning economic roles based on races (Hirschman, 1986).

However, after Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, the country adopted a different social approach with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971. The NEP, while primarily aimed at promoting economic equity among racial groups, also carried elements of cultural assimilation, particularly in fostering a shared national identity centred around the Malay language as the national language (Shamsul, 1996). Furthermore, Malaysian education has been another critical area where assimilation policies have been implemented. The Malaysian government has promoted a unified national education system. Nevertheless, the existence of vernacular schools, particularly for Chinese and Tamil communities, reflects the desire to cater to the racial minorities' interests and needs to have education in their respective mother tongues (Tan & Santhiram, 2010).

Interracial interaction in Malaysia

Over the past decade, most research on interracial interaction in Malaysia has focussed on social integration rather than assimilation in particular. For instance, Bachora (2014) found a significant positive relationship between interaction and appreciation of unity values among multiracial teachers, which suggests that increased interaction correlates with a stronger sense of unity. Likewise, Mahzan (2017) highlighted that social integration (e.g cultural appreciation) behaviour is commonly practised by multiracial youths, though the level of integration is still a work-in-progress. This indicates that ongoing efforts are needed to enhance social interactions among Malaysian teenagers.

Similarly, Ramlee et al. (2009) observed that while university students generally possess moderate levels of social integration, there are also instances of negative feelings toward other racial groups. However, these students reported greater gains in cultural knowledge and understanding through campus activities, reflecting the evolving nature of social integration among Malaysian student

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1.0 represents the theoretical framework used in this study. The concepts of assimilation and acculturation are central to understanding how individuals and groups integrate (social integration) into new cultural environments, but they differ significantly in their processes and outcomes. Nevertheless, it is worthy to note that the current study only focuses on assimilation as the subject of investigation. As can be seen in Figure 1, the two components of social integration are assimilation and acculturation. In the literature, assimilation refers to the process whereby a minority group gradually adopts the customs, attitudes, and norms of the prevailing culture, often to the extent of losing distinct cultural identities. This is characterised by a one-way absorption into the dominant culture, where the original cultural traits of the assimilating group become less pronounced or entirely replaced. Essentially, assimilation leads to a homogenised cultural landscape, where differences are minimised to promote unity within a social or national group (Cormos, 2022).

In contrast, acculturation involves a two-way exchange of cultural features between groups, allowing for the retention and mutual influence of cultural identities. Unlike assimilation, acculturation does not demand the abandonment of one's original culture; instead, it encourages the coexistence and integration of multiple cultural identities within the same social space. This process results in a more pluralistic society where diversity is maintained and valued, and individuals learn to navigate between multiple cultural frameworks. This mutual adaptation process highlights the dynamic interaction where both the host and incoming cultures can change and adapt without a complete loss of original cultural characteristics (Cormos, 2022).

In the Malaysian context, as detailed by Mun (2020) and Ibrahim(2021), assimilation takes a unique form. Malaysian policies and social practices promote a form of assimilation that respects and incorporates

cultural diversity, aiming for integration rather than homogenisation. The emphasis is on fostering an inclusive environment where different racial groups, including students in educational institutions, can interact harmoniously while maintaining their cultural distinctiveness. This approach aligns more closely with Malaysian society, where acceptance and understanding of diverse cultural practices are encouraged, allowing Malaysia to navigate the complexities of its multicultural society without forcing uniformity (Mun, 2020; Ibrahim, 2021)

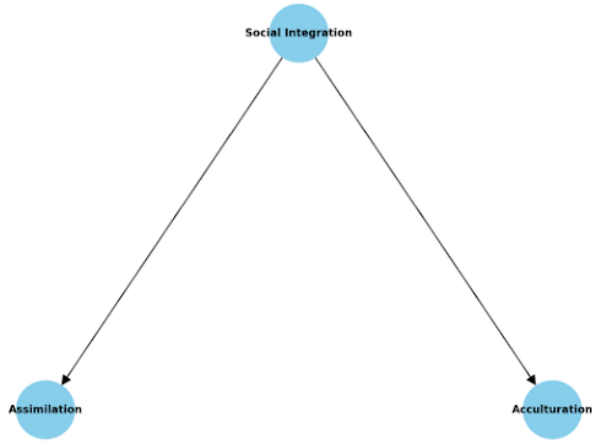


Fig. 1: Theoretical framework

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Sample

This study employed a mixed methodology, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data. The research targeted the entire population of first – year students at BERJAYA University College in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia encompassing a sample size of 85 students from various programs. By including the full cohort of first-year students, the study ensured a thorough representation of diverse perspectives within the institution. This mixed-method approach provided both breadth and depth to the understanding of assimilation practices among multiracial students at the university.

Quantitative Data Collection via Questionnaires

To gather quantitative data, the study administered a structured questionnaire. This questionnaire, adapted from Ramlee et al.'s (2009) study on social integration among multiracial students in Malaysian universities, was divided into two sections. Section A focused on collecting demographic information, while Section B captured students' perspectives on assimilation. Responses were collected using a Likert scale with four options: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The Likert scale facilitated the collection of measurable and comparable data across the respondents, providing a clear understanding of the general attitudes and experiences of students regarding assimilation.

Qualitative Data Collection via Focus Groups

To complement the quantitative findings, the study conducted a focus group discussion to delve deeper into the students' experiences and perceptions of assimilation. This session provided a platform for participants to share their insights and stories in a more open-ended and interactive format. The focus group discussion uncovered the nuances and complexities of assimilation practices that might not have been fully captured through structured questionnaires. This qualitative approach enriched the data with contextual and subjective details, enhancing the overall understanding of the topic.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, the quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, focusing on percentages to identify trends and patterns in students' views on assimilation. For instance, the analysis included calculating the percentage of students who strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with various statements related to assimilation. These percentages provided a clear, quantifiable understanding of the distribution of responses among the student population. Concurrently, the qualitative data from the focus groups were examined through a focus group discussion analysis to extract key insights from students regarding the subject. The integration of these findings provided a comprehensive picture of assimilation practices among multiracial students at BERJAYA University College.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics

Table 2.0 displays the demographic characteristics of the respondents in the current study. The racial composition of the respondents revealed a significant predominance of Chinese students, who made up over 70% of the total student population. In contrast, Malay students accounted for 20% of the participants, and Indian students constituted the remaining 10%. These proportions highlight the multicultural diversity within the university, providing a perspective on the assimilation practices among these racial groups. Regarding the year of study, this investigation focuses exclusively on first-year students as it provides unique insights into how these newcomers adapt to the university's multicultural environment. The experiences and perspectives of first-year students are particularly valuable as they are in the critical initial phase of their university journey, where assimilation and integration processes are prominent.

Demographic Characteristics	Percentages
Gender	70% females, 30% males
Race	70% Chinese, 20% Malay, 10% Indian
Year of Study	100% first-year students

Table 2.0 Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Students' Perception on Assimilation

The results on students' perception regarding their assimilation is shown in Figure 2.1. When respondents were queried about their engagement in college social and cultural activities of different racial groups, a total of 70.6% of the students confirmed their involvement in these activities. This high level of participation suggests a strong inclination among students to immerse themselves in diverse cultural experiences. Such involvement indicates that students are not only exposed to but are also embracing the traditions, customs, and practices of various racial communities which can shape their awareness about other people's culture. This pattern of engagement is indicative of successful cultural assimilation, where students demonstrate a willingness to learn about and participate in cultures other than their own. Importantly, this does not imply that students are abandoning their own cultural identities. Instead, they are enriching their personal and social lives by incorporating a broader spectrum of cultural elements. This openness to diversity fosters a multicultural campus environment where cultural exchange and mutual respect are prevalent.

As a result of participating in cultural activities at college, a majority (64.7% in Q2) of the respondents expressed their agreement with the notion that campus activities provide opportunity for interracial interaction. In contrast, 18.8% of them expressed disagreement with it. These interracial activities serve as

platforms for students to engage with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of different racial traditions and perspectives. According to a study by Bowman (2013), students who engage in diverse campus activities report higher levels of interracial understanding and empathy, which can reduce prejudices and promote more inclusive attitudes. Moreover, interracial interaction during college years is crucial for personal and social development. Hurtado et al. (2012) found that students who participate in multicultural campus activities are more likely to develop skills that are essential in a diverse workforce, such as cultural competence and the ability to work effectively in heterogeneous teams. These skills not only enhance personal growth but also prepare students for the increasingly globalised job market.

A majority of the respondents, specifically over 60% in Q3, expressed their satisfaction in engaging in activities with friends from different racial backgrounds on campus. Feeling content with such interactions can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, participating in diverse activities allows students to broaden their social networks and gain a richer understanding of different cultures. In another study in 2020, it highlights that students who engage in racially diverse friendships report higher levels of life satisfaction and well-being (Park & Denson, 2020). These interactions provide opportunities for personal growth and the development of a more nuanced worldview. Secondly, the sense of belonging and community that arises from diverse interactions contributes significantly to students' contentment. Thus, campuses that foster inclusive environments where students regularly engage with peers from varied racial backgrounds tend to have higher overall student satisfaction rates. (American Council on Education. These environments help students feel more connected and supported, enhancing their overall college experience.

In Q4, almost 70% of respondents agreed that they feel comfortable having multiracial roommates. This comfort level signifies a positive trend towards cultural assimilation and the adoption of diverse friendships among college students. Living with multiracial roommates facilitates daily cross-cultural interactions, which can accelerate the process of cultural assimilation. In the same way, a past study shows that students who live with roommates from different racial backgrounds are more likely to adopt inclusive behaviours and attitudes (Gaither & Sommers, 2013). These experiences help students assimilate various cultural norms and practices, making them more adaptable and open-minded in their social interactions.

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Q1	5	5.9	60	70.6	19	22.3	1	1.2
Q2	13	15.3	55	64.7	16	18.8	1	1.2
Q3	14	16.5	65	76.4	5	5.9	1	1.2
Q4	20	23.5	58	68.2	6	7.1	1	1.2
Q5	17	20	59	69.4	8	9.4	1	1.2
Q6	21	24.7	60	70.6	3	3.5	1	1.2
Q7	24	28.2	52	61.1	6	7.1	3	3.5
Q8	9	10.6	27	31.8	24	28.2	25	29.4

Fig. 2.1 Feedback on assimilation

Students' Assimilation Experience

Figure 2.2 displays the rating scores pertaining to extended questions on students' assimilation experience. In the first question (Q1), 47.1% of the respondents expressed disagreement with the notion that they exclusively seek assistance from people belonging to their own racial groups. This openness to cross-racial help-seeking may indicate the broader campus culture, which often promotes diversity and inclusion (Ford

1996). Past studies have shown that Asian students may face unique challenges in help-seeking behaviours due to cultural values emphasising family and group orientation. However, the willingness of a significant proportion of Asian students evident in the present study to seek assistance beyond their racial groups may signify a shift towards more individualistic values or a bicultural orientation, facilitating help-seeking from varied sources and potentially enhancing their access to support systems beyond their immediate racial community (Saykeo, 2018).

Nearly all (both strongly agreed and agreed) of the respondents in Q3 expressed their approval of consuming food from other racial backgrounds and visiting restaurants of other races with their multiracial companions. This positive attitude signifies a willingness to engage in cross-cultural interactions, explore diverse cuisines, and share dining experiences with friends from various racial backgrounds, fostering a sense of unity and understanding through food. The current findings are in line with the studies conducted in the past (Lino & Intan 2020; Nur Farrah et al. 2021). Both studies reported that the multicultural identity of Malaysians has expanded their palate, allowing them to be surrounded by various food choices in their daily life. This is especially pertinent to Malaysian undergraduates which described themselves as highly tolerant and reported open and positive emotions about others who practise different cultures.

Surprisingly, among a total of 85 students, 13 students in Q6 expressed their discomfort with wearing costumes that represent racial groups different from their own. The topic of cultural sensitivity and discomfort among university students in Malaysia, particularly regarding racial costumes, is an area that reflects the complexities of a multiracial society. Arina et al. (2018) reported that Malaysian university students navigate a landscape rich in cultural diversity, which sometimes leads to challenges in intercultural interactions. Their study emphasises that while students acknowledge the importance of interracial unity, its practical realisation is often challenged by situational factors and individual social constructs. This means that the discomfort some students feel with wearing racial-based costumes different from their own might be symptomatic of broader issues related to racial identity and sensitivity.

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Q1	5	5.9	27	31.7	40	47.1	13	15.3
Q2	23	27	50	58.9	9	10.6	3	3.5
Q3	41	48.2	40	47.1	4	4.7	0	0
Q4	44	51.7	39	45.9	2	2.4	0	0
Q5	30	35.3	47	55.3	8	9.4	0	0
Q6	24	28.2	45	53	13	15.3	3	3.5
Q7	18	21.2	45	53	17	20	5	5.8
Q8	16	18.8	56	65.9	13	15.3	0	0

Fig. 2.2 Response on extended questions on assimilation

Furthermore, more than half of the students (53:%) indicated that they frequently visited the homes of their friends from different racial backgrounds. This practice of inter-racial socialisation among Malaysian students is a reflection of the country’s multiracial composition and the value placed on unity in diversity. Social interactions across different racial groups are encouraged and often facilitated by university initiatives aimed at fostering a harmonious campus environment. Students also noted that their level of social awareness (65.9% agreed) regarding various racial groups is relatively high (Q8). This heightened social awareness is indicative of the educational and social initiatives implemented within Malaysian universities to promote understanding and appreciation of the country’s rich cultural diversity.

Findings from a Focus Group Study

A focus group investigation was undertaken to ascertain the degree of assimilation at the collegiate level. During the session, students noted that the college had organised intercultural activities that could foster social assimilation. “By participating in the batik programme, we gain the insight of others regarding colour” A student”. This result is consistent with the findings from the questionnaires that 70.6% of students participated in social and cultural activities of other races. Batik activities at the college level is to promote traditional Malay garments that are typically donning for national or festive occasions. Likewise, students disclosed that the college’s Student Counsel significantly contributes to the integration of multiracial students, particularly through its coordination of an introductory week for freshmen. Students also noted that respect is an additional critical element in diversity of culture. Thus, students emphasised that to acquire the respect of others, one must first show them respect, be open to appreciation, and occasionally set aside differences. They highlighted that genuine respect involves actively listening to others, acknowledging their perspectives, and valuing their contributions. This approach fosters mutual understanding and strengthens relationships. In a similar fashion, students emphasised the importance of being open to appreciating others’ achievements and qualities. This helps build a positive and supportive community.

Next, participants in the focus group pointed out that interracial marriage may foster a greater sense of mutual respect among individuals. They observed that such unions often require partners to deeply understand and appreciate each other’s cultural backgrounds and traditions, leading to enriched personal relationships. This understanding extends beyond the couple, influencing their families and communities by breaking down prejudices and fostering inclusivity. By navigating and embracing cultural differences, individuals in interracial marriages demonstrate and cultivate respect, setting an example for others and contributing to a more respectful and cohesive society. This dynamic not only strengthens their bond but also promotes a broader acceptance and celebration of diversity

Throughout the focus group study, students also underscored the potential for cultural history to be learned through cuisine. For instance, they mentioned rendang, a traditional Malay dish, likely has its origins in Indonesia. Therefore, exploring traditional dishes can offer valuable insights into cultural histories and connections between different regions and communities. Besides learning other people’s culture through food, students also expressed their viewpoints regarding the benefit of enrolling in history-oriented courses at university. They were convinced that a national history course may serve as a paradigm shifter by introducing them to concepts or ideas that they were previously unaware of. Understanding historical events and perspectives can challenge preconceived notions, broaden students’ intellectual horizons, and enhance their critical thinking skills. By studying history, students can gain a deeper appreciation of the complexities of past societies and the interconnectedness of global cultures, which in turn fosters a more informed and empathetic worldview. Students highlighted that history-oriented courses encourage them to critically analyse current events in light of historical contexts, enabling them to draw parallels and learn from past experiences. This reflective approach helps them develop understanding of contemporary issues and contributes to their overall intellectual and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

The current study set out to investigate the level of assimilation among students that study at BERJAYA University College. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that the state of assimilation among multiracial students at BERJAYA University College can be considered positive. 70.6% of the students agreed that they participated in cultural activities of other racial groups on campus. This high level of involvement indicates a robust inclination among students to engage with and embrace the diverse traditions, customs, and practices present on campus. Such participation not only reflects the students’

openness but also suggests a supportive environment that encourages cross-cultural interactions and learning. Also almost 70% of the multiracial students mentioned that they feel comfortable having multiracial friends. This finding signifies a positive social climate within the university, where diversity is not merely tolerated but celebrated. The comfort level in forming multiracial friendships highlights an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding, which is essential for fostering a cohesive and inclusive community.

It is evident that BERJAYA University College successfully cultivates a multicultural environment where students are encouraged to learn from one another's cultural experiences. This assimilation process helps in broadening students' perspectives, enhancing their cultural awareness, and preparing them for global citizenship. The active participation in cultural activities and the comfort in multiracial friendships indicate that students are not only exposed to diverse cultures but are also integrating these experiences into their social lives. Another interesting finding is some students also suggest that one way to promote assimilation is through food. The acceptance to eat food (permissible in their culture) of other races shows that they are open-minded and willing to assimilate into each other's culture. However, a number of students feel discomfort with dressing costumes that represent cultures other than their own.

The current study suggests that the realisation of assimilation between native communities and other racial groups in Malaysia is still in progress. To completely actualise this aspiration, it is imperative that all parties rise and be prepared to take action. Without hesitation, achieving that goal is exceedingly challenging. Each racial group must perceive assimilation in a favourable light, as the intention of the government is not aimed at eradicating the distinct uniqueness of the customs and culture. This is because the objective of assimilation in the Malaysian context is to create a diverse community that is united as one nation, fostering a sense of pride in being part of the Malaysian nation. For future studies, expanding the sample size and diversity beyond the current 85 respondents at a single Malaysian university is crucial to enhance representativeness. Moreover, addressing barriers faced by diverse student groups and integrating interdisciplinary perspectives will offer a more holistic understanding and actionable recommendations for enhancing students' assimilation.

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